Searching the Raji Tribe through the Novel *Kali-war Kali-paar*

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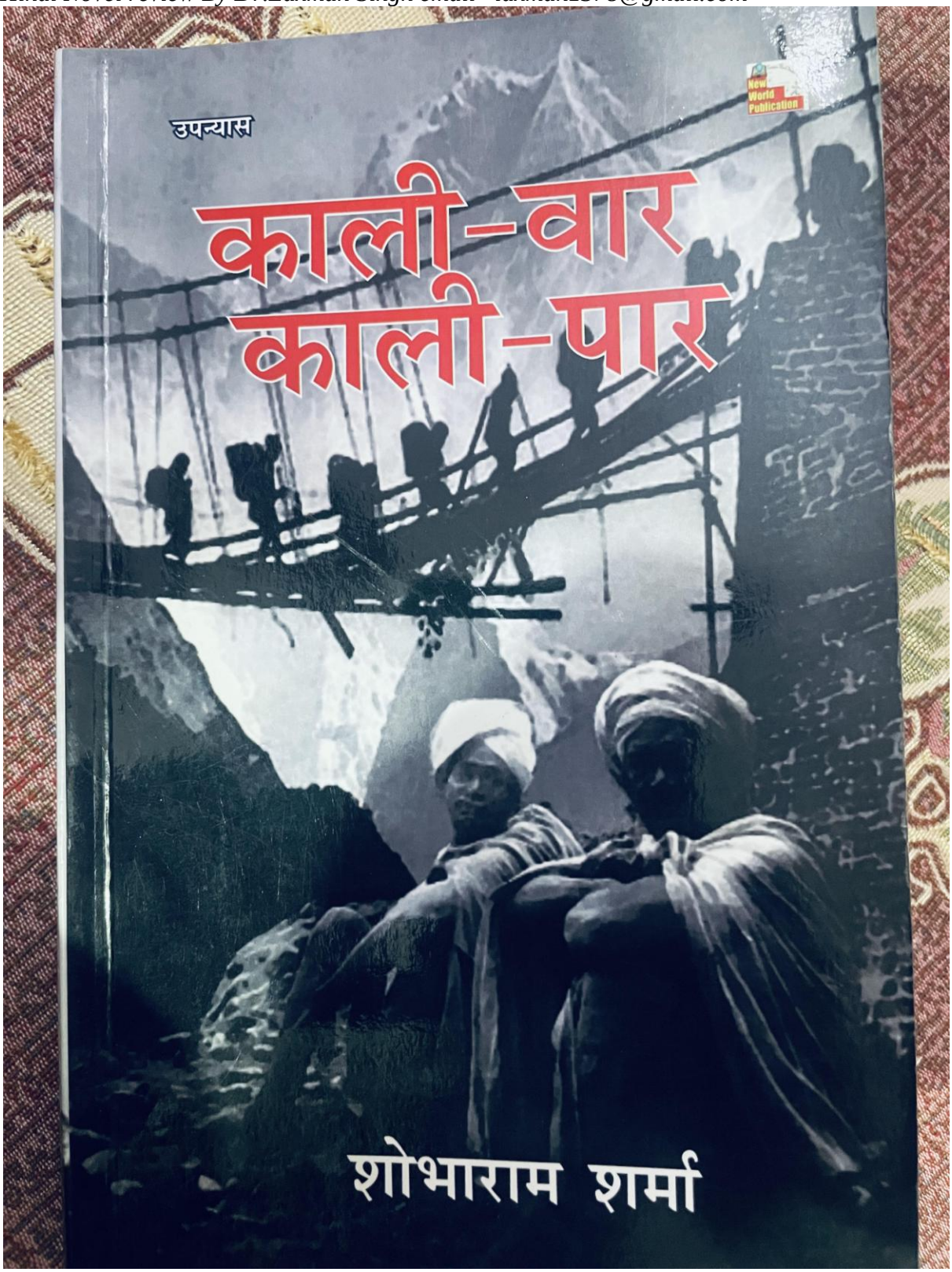

Kali-war Kali-paar by Professor Shobharam Sharma is a significant work of regional historical fiction that brings into focus the long-neglected history and lived experience of the Raji tribe inhabiting the borderlands of India and Nepal along the Kali River. The novel operates at the intersection of literature, anthropology, and subaltern historiography, offering a narrative that seeks to reconstruct the past of a marginalized community whose voice has rarely been represented in mainstream historical discourse. By situating the story within the Kumaon region and the adjoining areas of western Nepal, the novel builds a powerful connection between geography, history, and identity.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the Kali River, which today functions as an international boundary but historically served as a zone of cultural interaction and mobility. Before the political demarcations imposed by colonial treaties, communities like the Rajis moved freely across this landscape, sustaining themselves through forest-based livelihoods. The novel captures this transition from fluid ecological space to rigid political boundary, showing how the imposition of borders disrupted traditional patterns of life. In this sense, the river becomes not only a geographical marker but also a symbol of division, memory, and loss, encapsulating the transformation of an integrated cultural region into separated national territories.

At the center of the novel lies the Raji tribe, also known as Banrawats or Van Rawats, who are considered among the oldest inhabitants of the Central Himalayan region. Traditionally, the Rajis were nomadic hunter-gatherers who relied on forests for subsistence, collecting wild produce, hunting animals, and crafting wooden goods. Their intimate relationship with nature and deep ecological knowledge formed the basis of their identity and survival. However, with the gradual expansion of state control, forest laws, and changing economic structures, their traditional lifestyle came under severe pressure. The novel vividly portrays this shift, illustrating how a self-sufficient and mobile community was gradually pushed toward sedentarization and economic marginalization. This transformation is not presented as a natural progression but as a consequence of political domination, environmental restrictions, and social exclusion.

An important historical layer in the novel is the depiction of the Askot riyasat, a small princely state in present-day Pithoragarh district. Askot, historically associated with the Katyuri lineage, played a crucial role in the regional power dynamics of the Kumaon Himalayas. By incorporating the story of Askot's ruling structures, the novel highlights the relationship between feudal authority and tribal communities. It explores how indigenous groups like the Rajis interacted with, resisted, or were subordinated by local rulers. This integration of political history with tribal narrative enriches the text, allowing it to move beyond a purely ethnographic account to a broader reflection on power, hierarchy, and historical change.

Thematically, *Kali-war Kali-paar* addresses the process of marginalization experienced by the Raji community over centuries. It traces their journey from autonomy within forest ecosystems to vulnerability within modern socio-economic systems. The loss of access to forests, combined with social discrimination and lack of institutional support, led to the erosion of their traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices. The novel presents this condition with sensitivity, emphasizing the psychological and cultural impact of displacement. At the same time, it avoids portraying the Rajis merely as passive victims, instead highlighting their resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity.

Significantly, the novel also extends its narrative beyond the early historical and colonial periods to touch upon more recent socio-political developments in Nepal. It gestures toward the period of political unrest and transformation, including the Maoist insurgency, which reshaped Nepal's political landscape and deeply affected rural and marginalized communities. By situating the Raji experience within this changing political context, the novel underscores how larger ideological conflicts and state restructuring further complicated the lives of already vulnerable populations.

In addition to political upheaval, the novel engages with pressing social issues that emerge from poverty, displacement, and cross-border vulnerabilities. One such disturbing reality reflected in the narrative is the trafficking of Nepali girls, often driven by economic desperation and lack of opportunities, into urban centers like Mumbai, where they are pushed into prostitution. This aspect of the novel highlights the intersection of gender, poverty, and exploitation, expanding the scope of the narrative from tribal history to broader questions of social injustice and human suffering in South Asia. By including such themes, the work not only documents historical transitions but also exposes the continuing cycles of marginalization and exploitation.

Another important feature of the novel is its use of language. The narrative is written in standard Hindi, which makes it accessible to a wide readership while still carrying the cultural nuances of the Himalayan region. Through this linguistic choice, the author successfully bridges the gap between regional experience and mainstream literary discourse, enabling the story of a small and marginalized community to reach a broader audience.

From a literary perspective, the novel can be understood as a subaltern text that challenges dominant historical narratives. Instead of focusing on kings, wars, and political elites, it foregrounds the experiences of a marginalized tribal community, thereby contributing to the democratization of history. Its narrative style, rooted in regional specificity and cultural detail, lends authenticity to the portrayal of the Himalayan landscape and its people. The blending of historical fact with fictional storytelling enables the author to fill gaps in the historical record while maintaining emotional and cultural depth. Importantly, this work represents a rare literary attempt to portray a numerically small and socially marginalized community like the Raji through the form of the novel, giving visibility to voices that are often absent in both literature and historiography.

However, like many works of historical fiction, the novel also raises questions about the balance between fact and imagination. While it succeeds in bringing attention to an underrepresented community, it may at times romanticize aspects of tribal life or simplify complex historical processes. Despite these limitations, its contribution remains significant, particularly in the context of tribal studies and regional literature, where such narratives are still relatively scarce.

In conclusion, *Kali-war Kali-paar* stands as an important literary and cultural work that documents the historical journey of the Raji tribe within the changing socio-political landscape of the Central Himalayas. By linking the tribe's experience with the history of the Askot riyasat, the symbolic significance of the Kali River, and later developments such as political conflict and social exploitation, the novel offers a multidimensional understanding of identity, displacement, and survival. It not only enriches regional literature but also provides valuable insights for scholars interested in anthropology, history, and subaltern studies,

making it a meaningful contribution to the broader discourse on marginalized communities in South Asia.